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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000457

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SUBJECT: OMAN'S ALI MAJID WARNS YEMEN "ON THE BRINK"

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CLASSIFIED BY: Gary A. Grappo, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

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11. (S) In my farewell call May 18, General Ali bin Majid al-Ma'amari, Minister of the Royal Office and Chief of the Office of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, told me that Oman is "very concerned about stability" in Yemen, warning its neighbor is "on the brink." He said that southern separatists will soon formally announce their "movement," with former South Yemen Vice President Ali Salim al Baydh as its head. Oman has warned al Baydh that he will lose his Omani citizenship and protection if he joins the separatist movement. Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh is determined to protect Yemeni unity "by all means necessary," which would mean "another civil war" in Yemen in Ali Majid's view. Moreover, Al Qa'ida in Yemen is poised to exploit the situation, siding with the separatists. Oman's nominal second-in-command advised that the U.S., UK, Saudi Arabia and Oman should signal strong public support for Saleh and make clear that the separatists will receive no support from Yemen's friends and neighbors. End Summary.

"Unstable and on the Brink"

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12. (S) General Ali Majid moved quickly from the courtesies surrounding my farewell call to draw attention to the "unstable" situation in Yemen. In his meetings with President Saleh two weeks ago, he said, Saleh appeared to underestimate the seriousness of the problem in the south, especially in light of Yemen's many other ongoing challenges, e.g., the uncertain post-Saleh leadership situation, increasing tribal anti-government activities, continuing corruption, declining economic fortunes, government incompetence, and Somali pirates. Ali Majid said he urged Saleh to consider opening a dialog with the people of the south and work peacefully to address their concerns. Saleh was resistant, however, vowing to employ "all means necessary" to confront the separatists and preserve Yemen's unity. That could only mean another civil war, said Ali Majid.

Al Qa'ida to Exploit Separatist Movement

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13. (S) Responding to my query, he confirmed his view that Saleh enjoyed firm support among the Yemeni security forces, the presidential guard and "probably most" of the army. Nevertheless, civil war would be disastrous for the country, likely destroying what economy exists and precipitating the exodus of "millions" of refugees to Saudi Arabia and Oman. Moreover, according to Omani intelligence, Al Qa'ida is likely ready to side with the separatists to exacerbate disunity, edge out the socialists, and ultimately establish control over the south. "It would be another Somalia and a disaster for the region."

Ultimatum to al Baydh

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14. (S) The General confirmed that a senior Royal Office official had phoned al Baydh two days ago in Vienna, where he was "vacationing," and warned that Oman would not accept one of its citizens supporting separatism in Yemen. (Note: The former South Yemen Vice President was given effective asylum in Oman at the end of the civil war in 1993 and subsequently Omani citizenship.) Al Baydh reported that he had been asked to lead the separatists and will make a public announcement of the movement and his support in London on 21 or 22 May. When the Omani official warned that such

an announcement would mean immediate loss of his Omani citizenship, the exiled Yemeni replied, "I'll mail it (his passport) to you now."

¶5. (S) Ali Majid said Oman was firm in its position that no Omani would be permitted to advocate on behalf of the separatists. "We will stand by Sana'a and Saleh." He expressed anger that al Baydh had violated the conditions of his signed agreement disavowing

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future involvement in a Yemeni opposition organization of any kind. "He's a liar," said Ali Majid, but stopped short of categorically proclaiming withdrawal of al Baydh's Omani passport yet. Should he make the statement in London, however, "He will not be an Omani." Al Baydh's family may also lose their Omani passports. (Comment: Al Baydh has lived a life of considerable comfort in Oman, enjoying many privileges and gifts from the government of Oman.)

#### Weak Leadership

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¶6. (S) Despite Oman's concerns about Yemen's stability in the face of the separatist challenge, Ali Majid voiced little confidence in the separatists' leadership. In addition to doubts about al Baydh, he named Tariq al Fadhl as another likely senior leader who would be "easily manipulated" by others, including Al Qa'ida. In fact, he alleged, Al Qa'ida would seek to provoke armed conflict, incite greater instability, and if unable to control the entire south region, would likely carve out a portion in which it could operate and govern. In sum, Ali Majid said Oman knew many of the separatists very well, some of them "since the sixties," and had little regard for any of them.

¶7. (S) Oman is also concerned about the leadership in Sana'a. While Saleh remains as president, the government ought to remain firmly in charge. But the succession picture is cloudy. He refused to be drawn out on an assessment of Abdullah Saleh's son, but did evince confidence in the Northwest Regional Commander, General Ali Mohsin al Ahmar.

#### What Can Be Done?

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¶8. (S) Oman is not in a position to take significant action to mitigate the threat Sana'a faces from the southern separatists, said Ali Majid. Nevertheless, he pronounced Oman firmly behind Sana'a and might, if conditions warranted, be willing to come out publicly in voicing its support. He encouraged other countries, specifically the U.S., UK and Saudi Arabia, to consider doing the same, especially in the event of the anticipated announcement from London.

#### Comment

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¶9. (S) This is the fourth and most senior Omani official in a week to share with me Oman's grave concerns for Yemen's future. The issue clearly has risen to the top of Oman's security agenda, eclipsing for the moment even Iran. At one point when I raised Iran, he made one brief comment ad returned immediately to the subject of Yemen. Oman is worried that Saleh may fail to act quickly enough to stunt the separatists, leaving armed conflict the only remaining solution. In such an eventuality, Oman's chief worry is thousands of Yemeni refugees massing on its border and attempting entry, some of whom may be with Al Qa'ida. Oman's government is not equipped at present to deal with such a humanitarian crisis and lacks the resources and expertise to become capable. In all likelihood, it would refuse the refugees entry.

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